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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY  
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000709

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SUBJECT: REVENGING AFLAQ (I): FORMER IRAQI BAATHISTS IN  
SYRIA -- WHO ARE THESE GUYS?

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Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (S/NF) Summary: After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 hundreds of former Iraqi officials left Baghdad and chose Syria as their destination, not necessarily out of political or ideological affinity, but because of previously established ties to Syrian regime insiders and because Syria remained open to them. Two prominent former Iraqi officials, former Vice President Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri (the famous "King of Clubs" among most-wanted Iraqi officials) and former advisor to Saddam's Executive Council Mohammed Yunis al-Ahmad, reportedly arrived with "suitcases of cash" and a desire to establish a resistance unit in Syria. In 2006, former MP Mishan Jaburi joined them after being stripped of his parliamentary immunity and indicted for theft of money to provide food to guards protecting the oil pipelines around Kirkuk. Jaburi reportedly had been in Syria before, having fled Iraq in 1989 after being implicated in an assassination attempt in that year against Saddam. Arriving with tens of millions of dollars, al-Jaburi and his Syrian wife, Rawa al-Ustah, established al-Zawra television and subsequently, after Egypt removed al-Zawra from Nilesat, the al-Rai TV station. Like al-Zawra before it, al-Rai broadcasts pro-insurgency vitriol including footage of attacks on U.S. forces. End Summary

12. (S/NF) The ongoing dispute between Iraq and Syria over the role of former Iraqi Baath officials in Syria has generated interest in their current activities. This cable provides a brief overview of three prominent Iraqi Baath Party members in Damascus and should be read with a septel assessment of Syria's motives for continuing to provide safe-haven for former Iraqi regime elements (FREs).

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The Red-Headed King of Clubs  
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¶3. (S/NF) Arriving in Syria in Spring 2003, al-Duri was the highest-ranking Iraqi official in exile. He touted himself as the de facto leader of the Baath Party after Saddam's arrest in 2004, and his main focus was to support the insurgency with funding, people, and material, claims Reuters Bureau Chief Khaled Oweiss (strictly protect), who spent extensive time in Iraq covering the war. Al-Duri's ties with Syrian officials reportedly predated the war. Al-Duri was rumored to be a middle man in illicit trade between Saddam's sons Uday and Qusay and former Syrian President Hafez al-Asad's oldest son Basil, who died in a car crash in 1996, and Maher Asad, younger brother to Bashar. Al-Duri is believed to have pocketed a sizable commission from these oil and other deals. Local sources reported in 2004 that al-Duri arrived in Syria with millions of dollars in cash and used that money to buy Syrian influence to establish a base of operations, reports Oweiss.

¶4. (S/NF) Al-Duri's whereabouts between 2003 and the present remain difficult to pin down, but many observers here believe he traveled in and out of Syria frequently, reports Egyptian Political Counselor Adel Ibrahim (strictly protect), who closely follows Iraqi elements in Syria. Al-Duri claimed in July 2006 that the Baath Party was responsible for "95 percent" of the insurgency in Iraq and criticized al-Qaeda/Iraq Abu Musab al-Zarqawi for seeking to instill "hateful sectarianism." Despite this anti-Islamic bias, Al-Duri's focus on supporting the insurgency may have led him to establish links to al-Qaeda networks using Syria to pass jihadis into Iraq, assesses Crisis International Group representative Peter Harling (strictly protect), who cautions that most of the evidence for such links remains anecdotal.

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¶5. (S/NF) Al-Duri traveled around the region and in Iraq itself. (He was reportedly killed in Iraq in November 2005 but then later emerged quite alive in a press interview.) Al-Duri then resurfaced in Syria in 2008 just as Syrian-Iraqi relations were beginning to improve. In press remarks attributed to him in May of that year, al-Douri criticized Syria for not providing sufficient support to the "Baath cause," prompting a public rebuke from Syrian FM Muallim. (Muallim reportedly told Iraqi officials in March 2009 that al-Duri was no longer welcome in Syria.)

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Political Wing Leader, SARG Proxy  
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¶6. (S/NF) Yunis al-Ahmad also established ties to SARG officials by virtue of his reported role as a middleman for Saddam's sons and Syrian business contacts. He arrived in Damascus in 2003, established ties to Syrian officials, and opened office that promoted the insurgency. Contacts here maintain, however, al-Ahmad proved less adept than al-Duri at mobilizing support for the Baathist-led insurgency inside Iraq. Some sources maintain al-Ahmad opposed efforts to establish ties between Iraqi Baathists and al-Qaeda-linked groups. Ahmad's operation became known as the "political wing" of the exiled Iraqi Baath Party, according to Oweiss, while al-Duri's was referred to as the leader of the "military wing."

¶7. (S/NF) Al-Ahmad, with SARG approval, actively recruited staff and supporters from Iraq's expanding refugee community in Syria, according to Oweiss. Working closely with the Syrian Government, Al-Ahmad offered perks and a steady salary to Iraqis who supported his cause, turned out for small pro-Baathist rallies, and demonstrated against the U.S. occupation. He would eventually contest al-Duri's claims as the Baath Party exile leader after Saddam's execution in December 2006, Ibrahim reports. The al-Duri and al-Ahmad rivalry reportedly reflected differences over whether to ally

with al-Qaeda linked groups, control over finances, and al-Duri's indifference to SARG efforts to restrain FRE activities in Syria after Syrian-Iraqi ties began to improve in 2007.

¶8. (S/NF) Syria allowed the two organizations to continue operating in Damascus, but security services began keeping closer tabs on both when the rivalry reportedly escalated, according to Oweiss. "Before, the Syrians appeared to allow both (offices) to operate more freely; after the rivalry intensified, Syrians put them on a much shorter leash," he said. By mid-2007, al-Ahmad's group was, with SARG encouragement, openly questioning Saddam's rule and calling for reconciliation with the Iraqi Government. That didn't mean al-Ahmad was ready to face trial or return money, but it marked a significant shift in the group's outlook and put it at odds with al-Duri," comments Harling.

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Resistance TV Mogul  
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¶9. (S/NF) A third prominent former Iraqi official, former MP Mishan Jaburi, arrived in Syria in 2006 after being indicted for theft of money to provide food to guards protecting the oil pipelines around Kirkuk. Jaburi probably had been in Syria before, having fled Iraq in 1989 after being implicated in an assassination attempt that year against Saddam. Jaburi reportedly absconded with millions of dollars and was

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believed to have spent at least part of the 1990s exiled in Syria, Harling notes. He returned to Iraq in 2003 and emerged in a controversial dispute over the governorship of Mosul. After he failed to win that post, Jaburi established the Reconciliation and Liberal Party and won a seat in parliament in 2004.

¶10. (S/NF) Jaburi arrived in Syria in 2006 more flush, this time with tens of millions of dollars. Al-Jaburi and his Syrian wife, Rawa al-Ustah, established al-Zawra television, which broadcast pro-insurgency vitriol including footage of attacks on U.S. forces. Al-Zawra eventually lost its access to satellite broadcasting after U.S. intervention with the Government of Egypt to remove its subscription from Nilesat. Jaburi and his wife then founded al-Rai television, which continued to broadcast from Syria. Jaburi has also used his wealth to penetrate the Syria business community. According to reliable business contacts, he and Rami Maklouf were partners in the launch of Sham Airlines, although Jaburi reportedly sold his stake in the company in 2008. Al-Rai continues to broadcast an anti-GOI and U.S. message; recent broadcasts have focused criticism on PM Maliki.

¶11. (S/NF) Comment: Former Iraqi regime elements in Syria comprise a small band of a wide spectrum of Iraqi political movements with representation here, including the Jaysh al Mahdi, Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, and the Jaysh al-Islam. The Syrian Government has dedicated significant resources to penetrating these groups to increase Syrian understanding of and influence over Iraqi political actors. Although al-Duri no longer appears to be part of the FRE scene in Syria, his office in the Damascus suburb of West Mezzeh hosted a flurry of Ramadan iftars and other events, according to local diplomats. Al-Ahmad and al-Jaburi remain well-connected and, for the moment, untouchable. Al-Rai television, reportedly with Syrian approval, broadcast a two-hour presentation on September 13 by al-Ahmed bashing PM Maliki and refuting Iraqi claims that Syria-based Iraqi Baath Party members were involved in the August 19 bombings or supporting the insurgency more generally. According to several sources, al-Ahmed and al-Juburi live close to one another in two large villas in the western Damascus suburb of Yarfour. They enjoy continued access to Syrian elites and have demonstrated a remarkable ability to modulate their

message and activities according to Syrian preferences.

HUNTER